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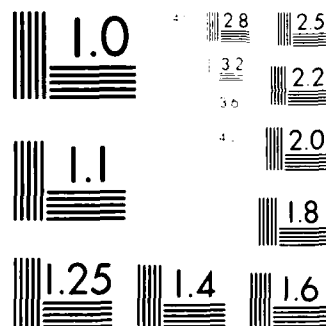
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THE AFTERMATH OF THE ACHILLE LAURO

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November 1985

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THE AFTERMATH OF THE ACHILLE LAURO*

The President, I believe, did the right thing in ordering American fighters to force down the Egyptian airliner and deliver the four hijackers of the Achille Lauro--the murderers of an American citizen--to justice. It was an opportunity that we could not afford to miss. The handling of the aftermath, however, has been terrible. We humiliated a friend. We bashed an ally. We snatched diplomatic disaster from the jaws of rare victory against terrorists. And despite current efforts to repair the damage, we remain pugnacious in mood, mistaken in the belief that by applying bold military force and bullying reluctant governments to action, we can defeat terrorism.

In our single-minded pursuit of terrorists, a campaign that has perhaps become too high on the list of priorities, we run the danger of combatting terrorism the same way we fought the war in Vietnam--unmindful of the collateral damage. There too we faced an elusive foe who did not fight by our rules. There too we sought a quick military victory.

In our euphoria over the successful capture of four terrorists, we would now like to believe that we have turned the tide against terrorism, that terrorists now will think twice before attacking Americans. It is far more likely that the war against terrorism will be a protracted contest, with dramatic victories on our side few and far between, and ultimately no final victory.

In this case, the two reluctant governments are long comrades in the struggle against terrorism. The willingness of the Egyptians to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, at U.S. urging, made them natural targets for the more radical Arab regimes and Palestinian hardliners who are opposed to any peace. As a result, during the past 10 years, terrorists seized the Egyptian embassies in Madrid, Teheran, Islamabad and Istanbul. They hijacked Egyptian airliners. They set off bombs inside Egypt and attacked Egyptian targets abroad.

*An abbreviated version of this article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1985.

In recent years, Egypt has faced the threat of terrorism from several sources: Palestinian extremists, Moslem fundamentalists, and agents of Libya's Qadaffi, all of whom violently oppose Egypt's willingness to talk with Israelis, its close friendship with the West, and its secular internal policies. Ultimately, it was fundamentalist fanatics who assassinated President Sadat in 1981.

Egypt fought back, sometimes with military force, and got into trouble. In 1978, Palestinian terrorists in Cyprus assassinated a former Egyptian cabinet minister who was a respected newspaper editor in Cyprus. They then seized an airliner and demanded to be flown out of the country. Egypt, without obtaining permission from the government of Cyprus, launched its own rescue effort and sent Egyptian commandos into Cyprus to take the plane. They became involved in a firefight with Cypriot soldiers and were all captured.

Egypt has maintained its political commitment to the Palestinians, but it has collaborated publicly and behind-the-scenes to combat terrorism. Earlier this year, Egyptian officials met with their American counterparts in Washington as part of an ongoing effort to make that cooperation closer and more effective.

Italy too has suffered the blows of terrorists and has waged a determined and effective antiterrorist campaign. In 1978, terrorists kidnapped Aldo Moro, the former prime minister of Italy. The Italian government asked for our help in the episode, and we provided some behind the scenes assistance while maintaining a public posture of noninterference. It was an internal matter.

We were clearly involved in the subsequent kidnapping of General James Dozier in 1981. It was the first major terrorist-made crisis faced by a new administration that had promised eleven months before to get tough with terrorists, and it posed a dilemma for Washington. We could not and would not ask Italy to make concessions to save Dozier's life, and if the terrorists killed Dozier, we would have little chance of delivering the "swift retribution" President Reagan had threatened earlier. Fortunately, the Italians saved us. Tired of years of terrorism, they went all out and mounted a massive effort to find the terrorists' hideout. Their successful rescue of Dozier gave Italy a

victory we shared in, won deserved praise and gratitude, and contributed to the decline of the country's major terrorist organization, the Red Brigades.

Like many countries, Italy had more success in dealing with domestic terrorism than with foreign terrorists who carry out operations in Italy. Not only do foreign terrorists, who operate from asylum abroad and who may receive assistance from foreign governments and their local embassies, present a more difficult foe, but governments, particularly European governments who depend heavily on Middle Eastern countries for energy supply and trade, have to weigh the adverse political consequences of certain actions against terrorists--something we tend to ignore. Sometimes deals have been made, political arrangements that smacked of appeasement. Facing death, Aldo Moro himself spoke about them. But at the same time, Italy has stood by the United States in the overall campaign against terrorism. Italy joined the United States in sending troops to Lebanon. Italian authorities arrested and, despite threats, have held Arab terrorists who were on their way to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Rome. Italy does us a favor by trying the four hijackers of the Achille Lauro. All of these actions have exposed Italy to political retaliation and terrorist attack.

In the most recent episode, rather than content ourselves with the successful capture of the four hijackers who murdered Leon Klinghoffer, we chose to press further for the arrest and trial of Abul Abbas, their leader and a suspected conspirator in the hijacking. Whether Abbas ever could have been convicted as a conspirator without one of the hijackers pointing the finger at him we may never know. Unfortunately he went free, but he has also been discredited by the dramatic capture of the four terrorists and may be a target for his opponents within the PLO, not an enviable position. At any rate, he is not worth a government in Italy or a diplomatic crisis between two allies. We should rejoice in the victory, not spoil it in a fit of pique.

Americans are in an angry mood right now. We have seen too many flag-draped coffins come home. We have heard too many tough words with no action, and that has only increased our anger. Now we have struck back--successfully. And it has gone to our heads.

We're mad as hell at Egypt for letting the four leave and we're not going to apologize to anyone for grabbing them. And, as for Italy, to quote one U.S. official, "we're pissed off" at the Italians for letting Abbas get away, and they are going to know it. Just as the American public in frustration at our inability to protect American citizens abroad or strike back at the terrorists who attack them, turns its anger on our own government, so our government has directed its wrath on its own allies.

It is allies like Egypt and Italy upon whom we will often depend for intelligence, for negotiations, for bases, for the covert but vital support when it comes needed to mount a rescue effort or an operation against terrorists. More important, these are the allies upon whom we will depend to achieve any progress toward peace between Israel and its Arab foes, to maintain a bulwark against more radical regimes in the Middle East and radical religiously inspired, anti-Western doctrines, to maintain Western solidarity and our strategic position in dealing with the Soviet Union.

It is not a matter of hawks and doves, an analogy best left rotting in the jungles of Indochina. We have used military force appropriately and successfully and may be obliged to use it again to preempt or capture terrorists, to rescue hostages, to retaliate. And it is not merely a matter of papering over diplomatic damage with a few communiques.

While we wait for the next terrorist attack, and surely there will be one, we must assure our allies that we will try to act in concert; when we are compelled to act unilaterally, we will be precise in our military operations, considerate in our diplomacy.

And we must understand ourselves that the struggle against terrorism is going to be a long fight, perhaps one without end, and like it or not, we are in it for the duration. There is no withdrawal option. We're going to need all the friends we can keep.



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